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THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE HISTORY OF FRANCE

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That the study of history should enlarge the understanding, deepen the moral faculties, kindle the imagination, and enrich the resources of life is a theory of education from which no thoughtful person is likely to dissent; but it is to be seen with regret how small a place these desirable ends occupy in the instruction of our public and private preparatory schools. "What do you expect to gain from this course? What are the uses of the study of history?" demanded a teacher of a class just embarked on this particular sea of knowledge, and the row of faces before him took on a dismayed and puzzled aspect, as if the question were wholly irrelevant. One lad, more enterprising than the others, gave in substance the reply of the king of France to Biron, "Why, that to know which else we should not know," but when urged to declare himself further was unable to do so.

The difficulty is that he was only too correct in his definition. History is too often taught merely as a means of unrelated information, or with the short and meager aim of passing a college examination, rather than as a great factor in developing the understanding and judgment. Why one end need exclude the other offers food for serious thought, and is suggestive of the need of a more complete understanding between the teachers who have charge of the historical work done in the schools, and those who continue the instruction in the colleges.

Much of the mischief, however, comes from the inadequate training given to the average student in the schools. The limited range of historical subjects is often to be regretted, as in the case of a famous public school in Boston, where the entire historical work for three years is concentrated on the histories of Greece and Rome, and where an investigation into events more recent than the Decline and

Fall of the Roman Empire is suggestive of the attitude of a certain jaunty gentleman, whose pious relatives concerned for his salvation, once asked him if he had ever read the Bible. His answer was that he had not studied it very carefully, but he had looked it over one Sunday afternoon and thought he had got the principal points.

In another excellent preparatory school English history is taught in half the school year, the textbooks being Green's *Short History of the English People*, in conjunction with others of equal caliber. The consequences of the method pursued by the famous public school are not as disastrous as they would be if its students were not taught general habits of concentration, and scholarly accuracy in other respects, so that they usually do well in the later college courses in history; but even so there is a loss of the cultivating effect of an early training in the development of events which have a direct and immediate bearing on modern situations, and are copiously illustrated by popular poetry and romance. The other method, too, often sends the boys to their college work, crammed with the distressful facts which have not been given time to filter into the understanding, and without a ghost of an idea as to the true connection they bear with the immediate circumstances of his everyday existence.

Of course, the study of history, unlike that of the languages, unlike mathematics, is a mobile study. There is no cast-iron rule for teaching it, no efficacious method that can be universally applied. Like the kindergarten, which is often a means of salvation for the children of the poorer classes, but a questionable benefit to the gilded babes who stand in need of a more bracing atmosphere than is usually afforded by the bland amenities of that cushioned seat of learning, the same sort of instruction is not suitable for the children of ignorant and foreign parents, and for those reared in homes of culture and intelligence. The facts selected from the vast theater of the world's action to present to these two classes of youthful minds—comparatively few they must be at best—should be different, and placed in different lights, in order to produce any portion of the good results we wish to see from so important a study.

Thus, in teaching the history of the United States to the small derelicts of Europe and Asia who fill some of our public schools, a spread-eagle policy is not only allowable but commendable. It is

better that these incipient citizens and voters should be told that they are part of the greatest and best and most altogether glorious country on record. It is better that they should be taken to stare at statues of Washington, and picnic at Lexington and Concord. But for lads whose wealthy and educated fathers do not go to caucus meetings, and sit by in passive helplessness while positions of trust are being bestowed on men of known dishonesty, a very different presentation of affairs is necessary. To them should be pointed out the dangers and weaknesses of the Republican form of government, the necessity of that unrelaxing vigilance without which liberty is not possible, and the advantage England maintains over us in securing for her governing class the intelligence and wealth of the nation, so that there is a distinct prestige accorded to those who adopt politics as a profession, instead of, as in this country, being a heart-breaking and discouraging pursuit for any honest and high-minded citizen to enter into. It is a sufficient incentive to patriotism for the foreign child to sing the Star Spangled Banner, and walk in processions on Washington's birthday, but the youth of culture has grave responsibilities laid upon him, for on him devolves the rescue of his country from materialism, indifferentism, base ideals, and all the dangers which attend extraordinary prosperity and ease of living.

All history teaches such lessons in the long run, but the history of the nation which is calculated to illustrate the dangers and advantages of almost every form of government, which carries every idea to its logical extreme, and presents it in such a clear and picturesque form as to be easily comprehended by immature minds is seldom taught in any school. The history of France, the leader of Europe for centuries, whose influence was felt in nearly every important event that took place on the continent of Europe from the days of Charlemagne to modern times, a history which carries with it an indefinable glamour and charm for even the dullest student, is either entirely omitted or only taught in connection with what is known as *Universal History*—this being a résumé of synchronous events taking place in all countries from the time of Menes and Assurbanipal to the days of President Roosevelt and King Edward VII.

This comprehensive and kangaroo-like method has its uses undoubtedly, but not at all in the direction achieved by the student

of French history as a unit, as he learns to know and marvel at that wonderful narrative of experiences written in tears and fire and blood, with an indomitable lightness, courage and wit, and so full of irreconcilable tendencies and contradictions as to be incomprehensible to the English mind, proving all the more broadening and valuable on that account. A people so dramatic, so determined to display their emotions, so quick to catch ideas and give them tangible shape, and make them in consequence common property, so skilful and resourceful, that if they had been set to make bricks without straw, would have produced something that at any rate looked like a brick. This nation, so potent, so human, so witty, whose qualities differ not only in degree, but in kind, form the corresponding characteristic in the English nature, would seem to have been raised up by Providence for the especial instruction and edification of youth, who feed upon its annals and romances with eager interest whenever they are thrown in its way.

A famous English critic once advised everyone who can only master one language beside his own to choose the French tongue on account of the difference of spirit that exists between that and the Teutonic speech. The flashing lightness and grace of the Gallic expressions are not to be found in the more ponderous tender and deliberate words of the Northern peoples, and are an invaluable aid to German and English minds in forming an agreeable style of expression, curbing the prolixity, and lightening the heaviness into which the Teutonic nature falls so readily. The French nation is, or has been, the concrete expression of good taste in art, and the daily needs of life. For depth and comprehensiveness we go to less self-satisfied and more balanced people who see life more steadily.

We do not call a man well educated who is totally ignorant of the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome; who has no knowledge of Hebrew spirituality or the artistic life of Italy—or of the history of his own country; and the history of France is as essential a factor in his development as any of these others, and occupies as unique a place. Why is it so persistently ignored then in our schools? Is it not partly from that old and deeply-rooted antipathy in the English mind, an antipathy as innate as that of an honest dog and cat, and which exists to this day in both England and France, so cordial always to each other's exiles—royal and otherwise?

Beaten, bereft, humiliated in open field and council as France has often been, she has had infinitely more influence over English mind and thought than England has had over hers. The English went on hating and imitating the French, marrying their princes to the daughters of French kings, following their fashions and speaking their language, while the French, with that intense provincialism which makes them poor colonists and home-sick exiles anywhere out of their own country, regarded the English as barbarians, brutal, and formidable as foes, to be placated or tricked if possible rather than openly fought with, but in no wise capable of teaching them anything except what should be avoided by civilized beings.

In this attitude has lain both the strength and the weakness of France. Her ideas, her charm, have a singular potency in being so purely her own, so unaffected by esoteric influences, so that more than once she has succeeded in attaining a glittering prominence unknown to any other modern nation. But the seeds of decay were implanted deeply in the very soil of her successes. The very necessity she was in of perpetually glittering in order to hold her own even in her own borders, is death to a continuity of power. Again and again has she been crushed and beaten, only to rise with extraordinary recuperative power like a phoenix from her ashes, and again and again have her own experiments failed from not knowing when to stop at the safe point. The apostle of liberty in Europe she has exemplified every form of tyranny known to man, from that of the people to that of the one man absolute.

A friend to distressed and persecuted nations she has proved herself more of a scourge than the original plague from which they sought her aid. With her monarch posing as the Eldest Son of the Church she has at times degraded and imprisoned its head, and for seventy years did what no other nation would ever have thought possible—removed its seat from the Eternal City itself to a provincial town in her own borders. Everywhere we find this tissue of contradictions in the brilliant fabric of her history. Even her national heroes are a surprise. We see her, proud to frenzy of her own nationality, take for her idols a German and an Italian. Not a drop of Celtic blood ran in the veins of Karl the Great, while Corsica had been transferred to French dominion only a few months before the Italian Bonaparte was born her subject.

All these dramatic inconsistencies, in which the most picturesque and romantic personalities figure, make the story one of immediate and absorbing interest to crude minds, unable to grasp the philosophic and elevated ideals that underlay the birth of the American nation, and which cannot apprehend the full significance of the rich and noble annals of our mother country. Not that the history of France should be given the precedence of these two, but when the rudimentary information possible for young things to acquire, is supplemented by the history of France, the whole study takes on new meaning. The brilliant, and often lurid light of those events illuminates forever other annals, indicates their meaning and imparts a larger and more philosophical method of judging historical and economical problems than is possible in any other way.

Mr. Frederic W. H. Meyers in an essay called "The Disenchantment of France," says: "It has fallen to the lot of the French people to point more morals, to emphasize more lessons from their own experience than any other nation in modern history. Parties and needs of the most conflicting types have appealed to Paris in turn for their brightest example, their most significant warning. The strength of monarchy, and the risks of despotism, the nobility of faith, and the cruel cowardice of bigotry, the ardor of republican fraternity, and the terrors of anarchic disintegration—the most famous instance of any and every extreme is to be found in the long annals of France. And so long as the French mind, at once logical and mobile, continues to be the first to catch and focus the influences which are slowly beginning to tell on neighboring states, so long will its evolution possess for us the unique interest of a glimpse into stages of development through which our own national mind also may be called to pass. . . . her inward crises have so often prefigured the fates through which western Europe was to pass ere long."

Apparently the study of history is neglected, even in France itself. "What do the young graduates of our colleges," bemoans M. de Vogué, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, "really know of that history, which for all the revolutions that have come and gone is bound to exert so great a pressure on their ideas and actions? What do they know even of its later chapters, the tale of those two centuries—the seventeenth and eighteenth—which gave shape to the figure of France when she stood at the summit of civilization? Hampered by the

programmes of the encyclopedists, that history shows the student its outline only—the bald anatomy of a skeleton. How is he to learn to know and love the enslaving mistress that same history becomes when it starts into prodigious life, seizes on the imagination, and finds its way through the senses to the soul, which it alternately bathes in enchantment and thrills with terror!”

And it is not only the native Frenchman who is bathed in enchantment and thrilled with terror, but this wonderful story appeals to everyone capable of feeling such emotions at all. It arouses not only the sentiment for ideas, but also enchains the interest of those whose minds run in more practical channels. The history of finance in France is an easy lesson in economics; the causes and effects of bad and good management being quickly and dramatically apparent. From the Capetian king who clipped the edges of the coin, and then refused to receive the depreciated currency himself, through the long centuries of unjust taxation, through the national bankruptcies caused by the extravagance of Louis XIV to the Mississippi scheme, and the assignats of the French revolution, no one who attains to even a superficial understanding of these things can fail to grasp the principle that a promise to pay is not money, and that no amount of government authority can alter the intrinsic value of a piece of paper, whatever assurances may be engraved upon its face.

When a ride in a hack costs the individual a bushel of paper money, even the most casual observer would see that there was something rotten in the financial condition of any Denmark in which such a demand was possible. The greenback heresy, the depreciation of coin, ought to be impossible to every high-school graduate; and if the lessons of French finances were taught I venture to think this desirable end would be more visible than it seems to be at present. On the other hand, the immediate success of clear-headed financiers like Ségur, Sully, Colbert, so splendidly seconded by the immense recuperative vitality of the country shows that industry and economy, pursued in comparative peace and safety form the only means of certain prosperity to a nation, as to an individual. The personality of Sully, the faithful and absurd, who conducted his private affairs with a pomp and publicity that would have made an emperor or an Englishman ridiculous, and who by his wisdom saved Henry IV and

France from a condition of bloody anarchy, is more or less incomprehensible to the Teutonic mind, which all the more on that account does not forget him or his work.

In religion we nowhere see parties so evenly balanced, the strife so fierce, and the issue for a time so uncertain. The Reformation wrought its work in England with comparative little bloodshed, except during the few years of the reign of Henry VIII's unhappy daughter, whose inherited Spanish conscience and training lighted that candle in England, which by God's grace, was never extinguished. In Spain, heretics never had a chance to long exist, but were burned or exiled on bare suspicion. In France, on the contrary, Huguenots and Catholics fought for years with varying success and appalling bitterness, led during the worst years of the struggle by a woman who did not care a pin whether she said her prayers in French or Latin, and to whom the massacre of St. Bartholomew was a political rather than a religious necessity. And who but a genuine Frenchman could gaily abjure his religious errors with a jest, as did Henry of Navarre, who, exclaiming that Paris was well worth a mass, seated himself firmly at last as a good Catholic on the shaken throne of the hated Valois. His motives in the change of faith, like his valor and his good humor, were above suspicion, and are universally understood, but his wit is pure French, and peculiar to the Gallic mind, though inherited in some degree by his pleasant grandson Charles II, who alone, of all our English kings, would have been capable of a kindred witticism.

The religious fervor of the French Peter the Hermit, stirred all civilized Europe to take part in the Crusades, led by French warriors and kings; and the French Godfrey of Bouillon was the first ruler of Jerusalem during the brief time it was under Christian—or as the Saracens called their invaders, without distinction of nationality, Frankish—authority. What saints and martyrs can France not show, from fiery souls like Bernard of Clairvaux, to the French Jesuit priests, who gladly gave their lives to teach the Indians of Canada and regions near the great lakes the way of salvation; and side by side with these we behold her statesmen and her kings—kings who proudly bore among their titles that of Defender of the Faith, and Eldest Son of the Church, openly defying her authority, and setting

aside every law of God and man to further their own ends or those of their country. Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XI, Philip II, Napoleon, never hesitated, when they were compelled to choose in these matters, and all four of these men succeeded in raising France to a temporary pinnacle of power and glory from whence she could dictate to popes and laugh at emperors. The vision is none the less dazzling at the moment, because it is brief, and the lesson taught of the secret of true and enduring power all the more intense, because it is blazoned on so large a canvas and in such brilliant colors.

The French impetuosity, and their passion for military glory, makes them among the bravest fighters in the world; but battle after battle brought them crushing defeat from the very excess of their undisciplined fury. When generals arose like Turenne, Condé, Saxe, Napoleon, whose genius brought this martial frenzy into some order, their armies became the dread of Europe, through the old proverb: "it's dogged as does it," still held good when they met the English in open field.

It is this frenzied disregard of human life that makes the French mob the horrible thing it is. Crushed and downtrodden beyond belief, as the poorer classes were for centuries, when the time came for revenge, it was, as Carlyle said, like the truth of God in hell fire, and the glare thereof terrified and enlightened the entire world. The French revolution affords never ending material for the storyteller, the philosopher, the historian, the biographer, and the poet.

"Collect the facts of the French Revolution," exclaimed Mr. T. M. Trevelyan, in an admirable article in the *Independent Review* on the study of history, "you must go down to hell and up to heaven to fetch them." What conclusions are to be deduced from the conduct of a populace, which at one moment shouts at rapture to see its monarch cut the top neatly off his egg—and in a few years is quite as enthusiastic at the sight of the guillotine performing the same office to the monarch; which with one hand tries to burn its Louvre with its irreplaceable treasures, and with the other wipes its streaming eyes at the spectacle of the statue of Strasburg, draped in black to commemorate its loss. Whatever may be thought of these matters, there is no doubt that they are universally interesting to both young and old.

But what constitutes one of the greatest charms of the French story, is the important part that women have played in it. What could be more characteristic of this nation, than that it should abide strictly to the letter of the Salic law, and at the same time be more under the influence of women of all kinds, from Blanche of Castile to Madam de Pompadour, than any other country on record. Where else do we read of a great and powerful nation being saved from destruction by a girl of eighteen—a warrior-maid, whose brief and glorious career and tragic death have placed her forever on a pinnacle apart from all others in the world. Where else do we find women of low birth and anything but respectable life, dictating to generals and statesmen; and feared and cajoled by foreign potentates, in whose veins race the proud blood of the Cæsars. What wit, what magic, what romance and pathos gathers about the lives of women like M^{me} de Sévigné, M^{me} Récamier, Agnes Sorel, Valentina of Orleans, Marguerite of Angoulême, Anne of Austria, Marie Antoinette, the Empress Josephine. What evil gleams from the pit play round the deeds of Isabella of Bavaria, Catherine de Medici, M^{me} du Barry and the knitting women of the Revolution. And what sainthood do we find in all the long annals of Christianity more exalted than that of Angélique Arnauld, abbess of Port Royal, M^{me} Guyon, Eugénie de Guérin, and many others; not forgetting, perhaps, Anne of Brittany, who sanctified for brief space the shameless court of France.

It is surely the part of wisdom not to ignore that wonderful scroll, but to unroll it in all its splendor, and point out its significance to the ready minds of those who will revel in its romance, glow with its heroic episodes, shudder at its cruelty, delight in its varied colors, learn its lessons, and fall forever under the spell of its potent charm.